

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS: HOW TO INCREASE AND MAINTAIN**Sardor Nodirov***Graduate, Specialized School N4,
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Uzbekistan, Tashkent***Shokhsanam Shukurova***Student, Westminster International University,
Uzbekistan, Tashkent***ABSTRACT**

Since different countries have different standards and regulations regarding their study methods, the quality of education differs strikingly. This study is oriented to define specific ways to increase middle school students' engagement during the lessons in Uzbekistan. In particular, the purpose of this research is to investigate the following question: How can teachers increase student engagement without spending the education department funding in middle schools? Interviews were conducted with five different middle school teachers. The collected data suggested the idea of providing teachers with handbooks of in-class activities. In future, it will give teachers a chance to choose from a wide range of activities at any time that is suitable for them.

Keywords: student engagement, middle school, class engagement, classroom activities.

1. Introduction

Paying attention to the teacher, actively engaging in the activities and comprehending the learning materials play a pivotal role in the student's academic standing. However, over the last years, the surge in social networks usage among teenagers made it hard to achieve and hold students' attention for extensive periods. This trend may be detrimental to the class engagement, which can negatively affect the effectiveness of school lessons. According to the NSW Department of Education and Communities (2015), student engagement is also an important factor in one's cognitive abilities. The organization reports that a one-point increase in student's engagement results in a six-point increase in reading achievement and an eight-point rise in maths scores. This research paper seeks to identify practical ways to increase engagement in middle schools and provide systematic suggestions for teachers and school officials. The following research question was adopted as a guideline: How can middle schools teachers increase student engagement without spending the education department funding?

2. Literature Review

This section presents a review of recent literature on the concept of student engagement. Multiple research studies confirmed that being involved and attentive during classes plays a significant role in the child's academic standing in the respective subject. Therefore, to sustain adolescents' high achievements and motivation, it is essential to find methods to improve school interaction and engagement. Numerous studies confirmed that parents' participation and inter-student communication also support students with value learning, success-seeking beliefs and willingness to self-improve.

2.1 Causes of different levels of middle school engagement

Many aspects determine the class engagement level in middle schools. Although engagement is commonly referred to as the combination of behavioural, cognitive and emotional indicators. It enables teachers and students to develop common motives and personal relationships around reverence and empathy (Turner et al., 2014).

Mansour and Martin (2009) highlight the importance of parents being actively involved in their children's school life. If students feel supported, they will develop a higher level of confidence in their studies. Besides involvement, home resources and parenting style may also determine the level of student engagement and motivation. The former may take various forms, such as the availability and use of computers. Electronic devices can visually and auditorily aid learners and entice them as a novel way of learning (Pomerantz & Moorman, 2007). The authors found two interesting correlations: combining parents' support and technology leads to better planning, teacher-student relationships and task management, and diminishes the cases of self-handicapping. It's worth mentioning that various studies reported that oversized classes might be detrimental to the overall class engagement if a proper staff-to-student ratio is not accommodated. Conversely, with smaller classes often come multiple advantages, such as adjusted curriculum, extended attention to each student and learning in small teams (Martin et al., 2014; Biancalana, 2013).

It is the outcome of nurturing relationships, achievement reflection, dedication to hard work, active learning strategies and encouraging classroom environment. Biancalana (2013) also suggests that students

are more willing to work hard and unleash their full potential if the subject is entrancing and resonant with what they already know. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that people feel intrinsic motivation when having progress or being expert in some field.

2.2 Effects of middle school engagement

Seminal contributions have been made by Fredricks (2011) on the effects of engagement in middle schools. The researchers present the hypothesis that school engagement additionally incorporates interpersonal needs, such as enjoyment, affection, and feelings of belonging. The study's authors also identified two distinct correlations: the level of student engagement is positively correlated with academic achievement and negatively with the dropping out likelihood. Engagement is supported by many studies to decrease throughout post-elementary years. However, students who are actively engaged in all facets of their academic life, such as the school environment, studying process, and learning materials, are less likely to fall behind or drop out (Fredricks, 2011).

2.3 Solutions to increase middle school engagement

Only a few studies presented practical solutions to increase students' engagement. According to Turner et al. (2014), classroom tasks, implementation of practice activities, and the overall classroom culture can boost student engagement. Tasks may help develop a wide range of cognitive functions from memorization to analysis, while the social culture sets standard rules of interaction and regulation.

Pomerantz and Moorman (2007) report that by assisting children with homework, discussing post-secondary pathways they aspire to take, and having an interest in their subject choices and education, parents may significantly increase achievement motivation and school identification. The authors also mention that out-of-home activities, such as visiting libraries, museums, art galleries, and cultural events, stimulate students' cognitive and behavioural functions.

Student engagement may be increased in the presence of good teacher-student bonds, a success mindset, and a sustainable climate for discipline. To make the learning process more effective, teachers can implement hands-on lessons that activate students' learning and higher-order thinking to connect personal experiences with new knowledge (Biancalana, 2013).

Overall, many studies confirmed the utmost importance of class engagement in the students' lives.

However, there was not much research conducted to identify possible ways to increase the classroom engagement of middle school students. The present research aims to find solutions and extend this field of study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview

This section of the report discusses the research participants, ethical considerations and data collection methods employed in this study.

3.2 Research participants

The subjects of the research are the middle school teachers based in Tashkent. Five female teachers belonging to three different age brackets (three to 20-29,

one to 30-45 and one to 60+) The primary teaching subject of our respondents was languages (English and Russian), social science (Economics) or science (Mathematics).

3.3 Ethical considerations

Before starting the interview process, we explained to the research participants the purpose of our research. We assured them that neither their answers nor our findings would impact them in any way. They were then asked to sign a consent form declaring that they understand and agree with their answers being used in our research. We promised to keep their responses and personal details strictly confidential. To avoid unethical practice, we additionally reviewed all questions and eliminated those containing sensitive requests.

3.4 Methods

For this research, we used structured interviews as a data collection strategy. The desired data was in the form of reflection and suggestions (qualitative). To conduct the interviews while adhering to the quarantine guidelines, we decided to contact teachers online using Telegram and Zoom. Overall, we interviewed all five teachers and transcribed the dialogues.

4. Results

This part of the study is intended to summarize the findings of the journey map with the interviews. Five different teachers from five schools were interviewed to find the relationship between their teaching methods and student activity, as well as experience and professional preferences according to seven various topics.

On the assumption of findings, the size of the regular class varies from school to school. This way, three out of five teachers (further referred to as "T1", "T2", "T3") had over 30 students in their class. T1 and T4 had eleven to twenty and twenty-one to thirty students, respectively. It is essential to highlight that all respondents had a more than fifty per cent activeness rate during the lesson. According to T1, the main reason for poor class engagement is shyness and uncertainty in student's own answer. She also pointed out that student interest issue is widely spread at schools, which correlated with T3, T4 and T5. On the other hand, T2 stated that the language barrier, low attention level among students, and absence of tutoring from the parents' side affected student engagement. T1 and T3 also mentioned that around forty per cent of teachers at their school are highly qualified compared to eighty-five per cent of teachers at the school of T2. T4 and T5 agreed that sixty to seventy per cent of teachers in their school are well versed in their subject, but they also noted that it does not constitute to be a good teacher. T1, T2, T5 noted that they feel like this is their fault if students do not participate during the class, whereas T3 and T4 said that they still try to make lessons interesting for everyone, and mentioned that it depends on the class's overall performance. T4 used to feel like giving up in classes with a low-performance rate, so she simply explained the topic. All respondents conducted additional activities during their lessons, except T5 - she preferred to keep strict discipline. Whereas T1 said that she combines typical in-class activities with additional media content, T2 listed the following activities: "Sinkwine", cluster, "decision tree", "aquarium". T3

usually conducts individual assignments, group work, videos, quizzes, creative assignments. T4 mentioned the importance of debates, teamwork, and social surveys. According to the response of T1, activities that make students work also engage them; on the contrary, T3 said that students love watching videos; nevertheless, she pointed out the significance of individual assignments. T2 answered that “Sinkwine” was the most engaging one, while T4 preferred Debates. Four out of five interviewed teachers adjusted along the way in their lessons, and only T5 stuck to the plan.

In general, the interviews described some of the major causes of poor class engagement and showed the relationship between students' activeness and teacher's approaches.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interesting findings

After analyzing interview responses from middle school teachers, we examined patterns and connections in the data. Our interesting finding was that students do not engage in the class due to having insufficient background knowledge on the subject. A possible explanation for this might be that those familiar with the subject feel more competent, therefore gaining confidence when participating. This causal relationship was supported by Biancalana (2013), who reported that students are more willing to participate in classroom activities if the material being taught is interesting and resonant with their prior knowledge.

5.2 Similarities

Another important finding was that the lack of parents' support might detrimentally impact student engagement. This result may be explained by that adolescents constantly need validation and support from their family members throughout their development stage. This discovery was in line with previous studies

by Pomerantz and Moorman (2007) and Mansour and Martin (2009).

5.3 Differences

However, the findings of the current study do not support the previous research of Martin et al. (2014) and Biancalana (2013) on oversized classes. Unexpectedly, it seems that the high number of students in the class does not correlate negatively with the level of engagement. Even though the reported class size in our research was over thirty, the participation rate did not go below fifty per cent.

5.4 Success Criteria:

Analysis of the findings enabled us to construct two success criteria that we used to develop solutions to address students' activeness.

1. Parents should take active participation in their child's performance at school;

2. Teachers should know techniques and exercises to engage apathetic students.

5.5 Solutions

Assuming these success criteria, we brainstormed the following solutions:

S1. Providing teachers with the handbook of in-class activities. Turner (2014) reports that practical activities and tasks may optimize classroom culture and boost student engagement.

S2. Conducting training among teachers to enhance their ability to work with disadvantaged students.

S3. Organizing workshops with parents to raise awareness about the importance of parents' contributions. According to Mansour and Martin (2014), it is essential for parents to be actively involved and considerate about their child's academic life.

S4. Congregating students for peer-assisting in the online communities.

Figure 1.

	Solution 1	Solution 2	Solution 3	Solution 4
Desirability	3	1	1	2
Feasibility	2	2	2	2
Viability	2	1	1	1
Desirability	3	1	1	2

The first solution is the most desirable, feasible and viable, since the handbook may allow teachers to quickly incorporate activities into the lesson without spending much time and resources on training and planning. Implementing this solution will not affect the school budget, as the handbook may be developed by the teachers and used continuously in the future.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Our research aimed to discover how middle school teachers can increase class engagement. It provided in-depth insight into the causes and effects of the varied engagement and sought to explore ways to improve this metric.

6.1 Conclusions

We reached the census that developing the teacher handbook of class activities may be considered the best solution. Its main advantage is to help teachers vary their lessons by including additional activities. It scores equally high on Feasibility and Viability criteria since the teachers and students can create and reuse it multi-

ple times in the future. This feature minimizes the production and maintenance costs. Moreover, the electronic handbook can be shared online and reprinted anywhere using office printers.

6.2 Recommendations

In order to implement this solution, the following recommendations were given:

1. The Department of Education needs to conduct a large-scale survey to collect activities and proposals from teachers;

2. Results should be reviewed and evaluated using the Desirability, Feasibility, Viability framework;

3. With the help of volunteer teachers, editors and students, the handbook should be designed and published on the online resources;

4. Middle school teachers across the country should be informed about the handbook's availability and benefits.

5. The teachers should print the handbook and use it during the lessons.

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